

# A death of their own?

ANN OAKLEY

When my mother died last November, a colleague advised me that there is probably no such thing as a good death. Her statement was, I think, intended to console me. For I had been out of the country when it had happened. We cannot be so sure of the fact of death except in cultural terms, and it is certainly part of the cultural tradition that close relatives should cluster round the dying—as death confirms our biological fragility, so it affirms our biological continuity to one another. Even in modern television soap operas. When dying scenes are esconed in high technology hospital beds, the family still draws near, poignant utterances attend the fading of the cardiac monitor. I had been reading Julian Barnes's novel *England at the Sun* at the time. Barnes describes the death of an old man who lives in a rented room, after a lifetime of being put down roots, a variety of undemanding jobs, and much skilful sponging. "I've a dose of if-he-doesn't-ask-we-won't-tell," he confides to his niece and great-nephew, who are his only visitors, wrapping in a mention of his impending death in a series of jokes, and boasting that he had asked his landlady to let him die there, rather than in hospital, by threatening to use some of her more dubious activities to reduce his inland revenue.

The old man dies what his great-nephew considers must be the only viable definition of a good death. A good death is simply the death that can be managed in the circumstances. Our cultural image of death—of the stoical, loving, carefully planned deaths of the past—may be just as comforting as our fantasies of historical births, accomplished in a state of miraculously liberating nature.

My mother died aged 84, crippled by osteoporosis and 15 unhappy years of widowhood. She had wanted to avoid this physical and emotional pain. She had joined Exit, duly signing the paper which she did not want heroic medical treatment. She had talked about euthanasia for years, but had stopped recently. That was the way in which I knew she'd decided it was to die a natural death. And this, I'm proud to say, she managed to accomplish. She died in her own bed in her sleep with her friends around her. It was almost as if she had chosen the moment itself.

Technically, in our society old age is not considered a sufficiently technical term to describe why people die. So the doctor's certificate wavered over the death certificate and something else. The certificate gave her occupation as "widow of Richard Titmuss, University Professor." I felt a little awkward about this on her behalf, but could

almost hear her voice in my head saying, "That's right, that's what I was." The most important part of her life was concerned with helping her husband in his work. She did her job well. She was proud of what she'd done. That is important.

Death reveals, but at the same time closes off everything. I think I have been most surprised by the difference between the second parent's death and the first. Other people to whom I have talked have echoed this. Not to have parents at all is to feel particular deprivation and a special responsibility. The responsibility is towards one's own children, for there is no generation above one any more; no generation, indeed, between one's own and death. The deprivation is that of being an orphan. There is no longer anyone who cares the way a parent does—about the latest insult or achievement in our life. Even in difficult parent-child relationships, a certain confiding occurs. There is a spoken and unspoken language of complaint—not only about each other but about the world.

I particularly miss my mother complaining about me. Who else is going to reprimand me, relentlessly point out my failings, with

**Not to have parents at all is to feel particular deprivation and a special responsibility.**

the same incisiveness? I have a couple of daughters who show promise in this direction, but they don't know me the way my mother did. No one ever does.

Of course, the knowledge parents have of children is precisely what children rebel against. But I now understand that children also count on the existence of such knowledge and the extent of its irritations. It is as though there must be this wall of indisputably known facts about one's early life and character to knock one's head against. Any wall is better than no wall. The death of parents promotes a sympathy with the yearning of adopted children to locate their biological parents. The point is to know as much as you can about where you came from. It's all to do, as the poet says, with beginnings and ends being basically the same.

The other side of the deprivation has to do with history. When both your parents are dead, it is no longer possible to ask certain kinds of question. Some are factual: for example, what time of the day was I born? Other questions concerning feelings are more intimate. The answers to those die with the person who is dead. One is thereafter condemned to a state of irremediable ignorance, which is especially difficult for

those of us reared according to the Protestant ethic which teaches that anything can be known provided they try hard enough.

The dead leave their own knowledge, however. They die surrounded by possessions which constitute a partial record of who they were. The old man in Barnes's novel left a trail of defunct fish and chip packets under his bed. My mother had completed an astonishingly methodical sorting of her possessions, leaving only what she intended me, her only child, to know about her. She left files of correspondence with the word "pruned" inscribed on the cover.

I was advised by everyone to get rid of her clothes as quickly as possible, as this would be the most distressing part. Well, it was and it wasn't. I opened her wardrobe door and found myself looking at a row of crimplene Marks and Spencer dresses, most of which she had never worn. These seemed so impersonal. It was inappropriate to weep over them. My son took them to Oxfam and nearly got arrested in the process. The policeman didn't believe him when he said he was delivering his dead grandmother's clothes. A sprightly, poorly shaven lad, driving too fast through suburban streets—a likely story!

Humour in the circumstances surrounding death is highlighted because of its proximity to the sacred event; our serious stance towards death is momentarily relieved by the diversion of the profane. At my mother's cremation, as we waited to be processed in the undertaker's car behind the coffin, an official emerged from the building, put his head through the car window, and remarked that "the half past two person hadn't turned up yet. Would we care to wait?" We speculated on the reasons for the delay—forgetting to die, a hopeful relation making the booking just in case?

The most thoughtful and sensitive document I know on the particular dilemmas of mothers and daughters at such a time is Simone de Beauvoir's record of her mother's last days, *A Very Easy Death*. Madame de Beauvoir died of cancer in hospital, and it was a nurse, not either of her daughters, who called her death "very easy." Simone de Beauvoir deals movingly in the book with the tightly woven web of intensely differing emotions that binds us to our mothers. Indeed, some of de Beauvoir's statements about her mother apply so exactly to mine—for example, de Beauvoir says of her mother that, "She was often shocked by what was in my books; but she was flattered by their success"—that I am led to wonder about the inflexibility of the rules governing mother-daughter relations in this culture.

The memory of maternal pride seems poor consolation for the violation of death. *A Very Easy Death* concludes with the view that, however easy, however good, everyone's death is nonetheless some sort of unjustifiable violation. We may choose to die, and may be able, as my mother did, to exercise our autonomy to the end by choosing to die a natural death, but it is also true to say that every death is some form of accident which it is the responsibility and privilege of the living to lament

## ASIAN LAWYERS' PLEDGE

A group of Asian lawyers have pledged to give their services free to all women who suffer domestic violence. This was an extension of their decision to work without pay for all those who are victims of racial violence. They also agreed to support women's organisations fighting domestic violence.

The pledges came at a conference of Asian lawyers held last month, and were the result of strong pressure from women present. However, many women expressed doubts about whether the pledges made will be kept.

The most significant presence at the conference was that of the Southall Black Sisters. They turned talk of dowry and domestic violence being "naughty" or "bad habits" into practical proposals. They recognised that open discussion of issues like domestic violence could be used by racists, but called for an end to the silence on such issues within the Asian community.

The lawyers also condemned immigration laws that sought to divide families. They pointed to the irony of the DNA tests, designed to catch those who lied about being related to people in the UK, that were now finding 99 per cent of claims to be true.

The conference agreed to set up a charity to fund private prosecutions of victims of racial violence, demanded that Asians have access to all levels of the judiciary and condemned the police for failing to act over racial attacks. **Rahilla Gupta**

Here is an everyday story in the life of a concerned, social worker in an "ethnic" area. A black Asian woman needs help. Severe case of domestic violence. Said social worker very aware (racially) having been on training course. The woman wants to leave home. There are Asian women refuges around. Decisions should be simple, evidence suggests lives are at risk. But, agonises social worker, is this racist? Is it breaking up ancient historical core beliefs, and the cultural solidarity of the beleaguered British Asian com-

# RACE AND SOCIETY

UPDATE

## Black nurse wins tribunal

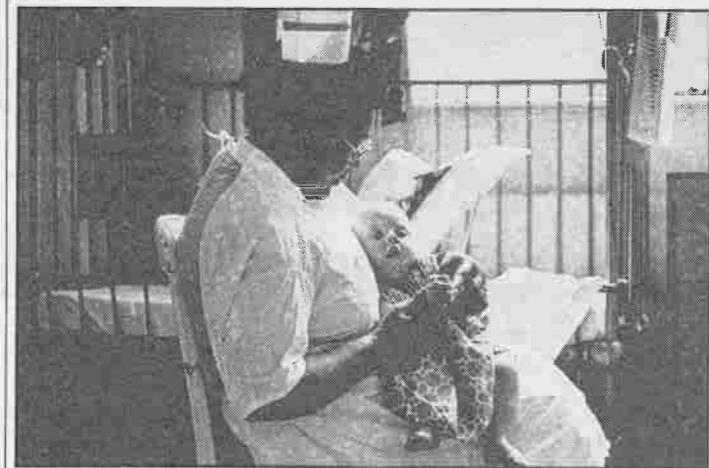
A black hospital nurse has won £500 compensation from Newham health authority, after an unidentified employee told her over the phone words to the effect that: "This country belongs to the whites. Go back to your own country. I am not paying blacks a f\*\*\*ing thing any more."

But despite winning the award as compensation for injury to her feelings, nurse Brown commented: "I am still very dissatisfied. The person who made the remarks was not identified and I felt very unsup-

ported when pursuing the issue."

Nurse Marion Brown, a Jamaican, has worked for Newham health authority for the last 14 years. In July 1987 she had a query about her wages and it was in the course of discussing it that the abusive comments were made. They were overheard by a secretary.

Despite knowing exactly where and when the call was put through, the identity of the person remains a mystery. "I feel that there has been a cover-up," says Brown. James Sims, a man-



"Go back to your country."

ager for the health authority, commented, "The authority was satisfied that the investigations were carried out thoroughly."

Nevertheless the tribunal found the health authority liable for the racial abuse from an employee in the payroll office.

In its defence Newham produced its equal opportunity policy. The policy forbids racial abuse by employees. But staff had not been given a copy of the policy since it came out in 1985, and since then there had been a high turnover.

Marion Brown also had serious reservations about the support she received from her union, NUPE, which has its own equal opportunities policy. "Although I was not satisfied with the investigation, the union people were. It was the CRE who supported me in taking the case to the tribunal, not them."

Ken Deaves, the NUPE representative commented, "After the investigation we felt that little more could be done. But we did not discourage Brown from going to a tribunal."

A spokesperson for the CRE said: "This was a disgraceful incident, particularly for a public authority. It shows that a policy of equal opportunities is not enough by itself."

The authority have subsequently amended their equal opportunity policy so that individual staff are now liable to disciplinary action for failing to comply with it. It is being issued to all employees. "We have been running ethnic minority awareness courses as well," said Sims. "In fact, I'm going on one tomorrow." **Claire Sanders**

UPVIEW

## The confused social worker

community? Will it feed those foragers who seek meaty evidence to sustain a view of the "barbaric" black?

It is a genuine dilemma and encapsulates the tensions between those two battling beasts, horns often locked, sexism and racism. It's crucial to confront.

In order to do that, Asian women activists need to be consulted. Many of them now feel that for too long they have been

asked to collude in a cryptal conspiracy in the name of solidarity. However sensitive, the abuse of women, which exists equally in white and black communities, has got to be exposed.

Women in the community are increasingly concerned about dowry violence, about the pressure on mothers not to have daughters, leading to the much publicised gender abortions, and about the way they are

oppressed in the family. Men, on the whole, have been conspicuously silent on such issues—except for those self-opinionated leaders who argue poignantly for a preservation of the status quo.

Social workers and others may have been drawing too much from these traditional sources for guidance. They have been reluctant to intervene.

The answers in reality are simple. Culture and racism apart, when a woman's life is threatened it is her voice that should determine actions taken by any protective agency. ■



## BAKER'S BILL: EDUCATION FOR ALL?

**W**hat effect will Kenneth Baker's education bill have on the education of Britain's black children? This question has remained submerged as the national debate over its key provisions has raged. However, many experts on black education—including those at the Commission for Racial Equality—are concerned that aspects of the bill may represent a major set back for the cause of multiracial education.

Baker describes his bill as a "charter for better education . . . for all of our children, whatever their ability, wherever they live, whatever type of school their parents choose for them." In order to achieve this there will be open enrolment to schools, with upper limits for classes being set at the 1979-80 levels. Parents will also be able to vote for a school to opt out of local authority control. Financial delegation to schools will give governing bodies greater control over budgets (although exactly how much is as yet unclear). A national curriculum will also be set on which children will be assessed at the ages of seven, eleven, 14 and 16 and their results and reports made accessible to parents. But what will all this mean for black parents and children?

Open enrolment will ensure that schools can no longer impose "artificial barriers" on their intake. These barriers were introduced to stop the less popular schools from becoming depleted. The higher 1979-80 limits will be imposed instead. Under open enrolment there is a danger of articulate parents getting their children into the better schools, and those in deprived inner city areas

becoming "sink schools" or simply unviable. White parents may choose to send their children to predominantly white schools, which will mean that black parents may be left with no choice but to have their children educated in largely black schools. As Dr Atvar Brah, a senior lecturer at London University, pointed out at a recent conference on the subject: "Whatever the arguments for or against segregation, this is a very different thing from imposed segregation. And whatever Baker may say about open enrolment not leading to such segregation, Dewsbury has already shown the forces that such a policy may unleash."

**F**or parents, such as those at Dewsbury, who want to get away from any form of multiracial education or equal opportunity stipulations, there is the opting out clause. Schools that become grant-maintained will no longer be covered by section 71 of the Race Relations Act. This places a duty on local education authority's to operate so as to eliminate discrimination and to promote good race relations. At present at least 50 LEA's have equal opportunity policies and many provide valuable centralised resources for ethnic minorities. Schools that opt out could choose to ignore these facilities.

How parents choose to opt out is also causing some concern. With the defeat of the amendment proposed by Tory MP, Keith Hampson, there only has to be a majority of one of those who vote—and not a majority of one out of all parents. Nor is there any requirement that the governing body that would then run the

school, should be representative of the community it serves. At present there are very few black governors.

In schools that have not opted out, financial delegation will mean that governors have increased powers over a delegated budget. Although the bill has not fully clarified what powers these will be, or how much the budget will be, there are concerns that the it will not take into account the needs of ethnic minorities.

For an education authority like ILEA, which may in any case be abolished, the bill could be crippling—indeed, it is meant to be. ILEA's centrally-run language facilities, inspectorate, learning materials and research unit will deteriorate. In 1985, 19 per cent of ILEA's pupils spoke a language other than English and in a recent survey ILEA was found to be one of the LEA's that parents least wanted to opt out of.

But much as Baker has stressed parental choice, even in the face of fears of segregation which severely limit choice for many parents and pupils, much of the bill aims at centralising control. As Dr Brah pointed out, a national curriculum that controls 90 per cent of a timetable does not necessarily allow for greater parental choice. And although such a curriculum need not be a bad thing, one "that in no way reflects the needs of a modern multi-cultural society" is.

**K**enneth Baker says that the national curriculum is designed to "promote the development of the pupil and society." It will establish three core subjects—mathematics, English and science—and seven foundation subjects—history, geography, technology, music, art, physical education and (for secondary pupils) a modern foreign language. But Dr Brah fears that the term "modern foreign language" excludes the home languages of children from ethnic minority families, and she sees no place for such languages in the timetable for foundation or additional subjects.

The Commission for Racial Equality itself feels that the curriculum is in danger of going back on the "education for all" philosophy contained in the Swann report and accepted today by most educationalists. There is no mention of how it will tackle subjects such as the extent of racism, discrimination and prejudice in society. If the pluralist nature of British society is not reflected in the curriculum, then it is hard to see how it will achieve its stated objective, "to develop the potential of all pupils and equip them for citizenship."

The whole way of testing this curriculum also raises questions of educational opportunity. The assessment tests at seven, eleven, 14 and 16 according to Dr Brah, "will not improve standards, but label children." The easy categorisation as remedial of children for whom English is a second language is of particular concern, especially if the tests are not devised with such children in mind. More generally, there is widespread concern over the ability of any test to evaluate pupils, let alone those from different cultures.

However, tests may not necessarily disadvantage black children. In a recent survey by Cecile Wright, lecturer at the University of Sheffield, it was found that teachers' estimates of how Afro-Caribbean children would do in tests was consistently lower than the actual results the children did obtain.

The bill proposes increased parental access to school records, including behavioural ones. This provision is especially important for parents of black children, and the CRE feels that it should apply to reports on incidents in schools as well, where two or more pupils are involved. In an investigation carried out by the CRE into suspension from schools in Birmingham in 1985, it was found that black children were four times more likely to be suspended than white and for fewer and less serious offences. Parents were often unclear about the reasons for their child's suspension and teachers' records, not disclosed to the parents, were used in disciplinary procedures.

Educationalists are concerned that while the bill is littered with references to parental choice and higher standards, it may not succeed in providing either for low income families. In addition, its lack of attention to the ways in which Britain has changed since the 1944 Education Act—and particularly the way in which it has become a multiracial society—could seriously damage black children's educational prospects.

Claire Sanders

## Multi-cultural education at work

**ANNE MONTAGUE** visited Cranford community school and found high academic achievement alongside a multi-cultural, community based curriculum.

**C**ranford was London's first purpose-built community school, combining comprehensive with adult education. Since it was established in 1974 the school's demographic profile has changed dramatically. From having a 90 per cent white majority the school is now 65 per cent non white, mainly Asian but including Chinese, Philippino and Traveller children. How has it adapted?

"There's been a change in awareness and a recognition of the need to look at equal opportunity issues," says Richard Eeva, the headmaster. He denies this was reactive change: "We didn't see the situation as a problem but as a positive opportunity." The head is well aware of the dangers of tokenism and the importance of taking the staff along with the changes and being receptive to their feelings. Intensive in-service training to develop techniques for dealing with racist and sexist behaviour, is now obligatory for all staff.

In real terms it means that books and other teaching materials have been carefully vetted and if necessary thrown away and replaced. The school now offers GCSE's in Punjabi, Bengali and Urdu, as well as the standard French, Spanish and German and a multi-cultural approach shapes every syllabus. Second year geography includes a positive examination of the UK's cultural diversity, while integrated humanities looks at the values and attitudes associated with different kinds of stereotyping.

Shashi, a dynamic, bright Asian 16 year old student, who showed me round the school explained that her class was currently looking at aspects of inequality. The third year religious studies class I visited was looking at death and funeral rites in different cultures—each pupil sharing his or her experience with the group.

Children are encouraged to be expressive, forthright and curious. As Shashi explained: "We discuss things and put forward our own opinions, but it's just as important that we learn to listen so we can understand each other's point of view."

"Before, our policy was negative—racism was something you felt guilty about, that wasn't allowed. So, it was all bottled up and happened outside the school gates. Now we think it's important to allow it in a controlled way, to enable people to understand their own racism and work at it." He knows that there's still a lot to be done. The teaching staff is over 80 per cent white and so is the school's governing body. But Cranford's new head, who joins the school in April, is Afro-Caribbean. And involvement by Asian parents is still scanty, although Kulsum Choudry, the community liaison teacher, (who is a section 11 teacher which is significant) is working on establishing links.

Eeva relishes the challenge that lies ahead. Some things help he thinks. "What keeps it fresh is the high staff turnover (lots of staff are promoted from this school) and the genuine understanding among them that you're never on top of racism, you have to go on."

But what struck me most of all, was how the central structure of a good community school, provided an ideal bedrock for establishing a curriculum based on egalitarian principles. Where rank or artificial positions based on age or "professionalism" don't matter that much and where, teamwork, cooperation and openness are valued and actually define good education. Anti-racist education is both an integral part of and an exciting extension of that philosophy.

Cranford school: employment and academic achievements:

● In 1987, of over 200 school leavers at the end of the fifth form, only six have so far failed to find employment.

● In the same year, of 40 pupils who took A' levels, 28 went on to higher education. Of these, 80 per cent were non-white. ■

We're all going to die. Black people are full of BS." "AIDS? Cha, man—that is batty man thing, pure fuckries d serve them right an' all." No views on a health crisis, e expressed by a father waiting to collect his kids from school, the other from a young an chatting in a pub. Maybe either are "typical" of opinion the black communities, but they are symptomatic of the politics of fear induced by AIDS. As a new kind of disease AIDS undermined traditional confidence in the authority of medical knowledge. In the absence of a known cure or a clear "scientific" explanation, the irrational search for someone

blame has taken precedence over rational debate on how best we can protect ourselves. The initial response was to receive the disease as a "gay gue," but when its presence in the heterosexual population was reluctantly acknowledged blacks were scapegoated as its cause. Tory MPs argued for the compulsory screening of immigrants arriving from the third world. Medical, media and government responses alike have amplified the message of fear, leading to a reinforcement of prejudice as an acceptable outlet for mass anxieties.

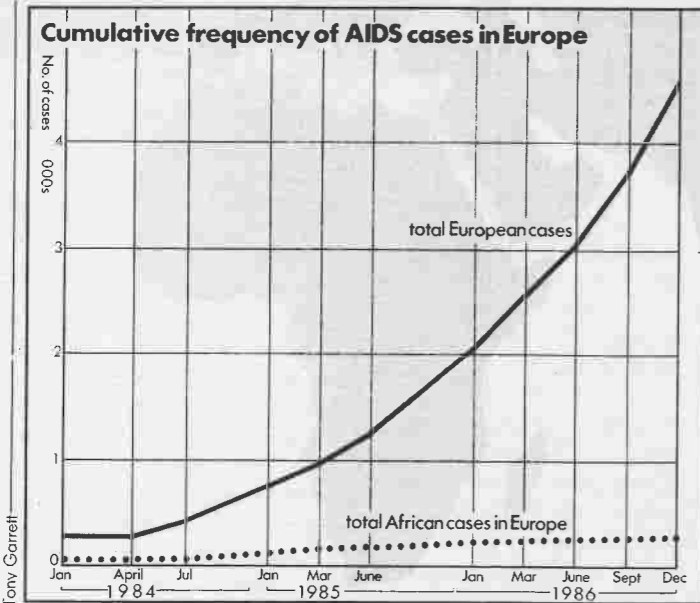
Black people are not immune to this sense of hysteria over AIDS. Some have internalised racist misinformation. Others have succumbed to morbid fatalism, fear or vitriolic homophobia—like those who suggest that there can be no black gays and lesbians.

This came through at the recent disappointing conference "Racism and AIDS" organised by the London Strategic Policy Unit and Brent council.

Yet it is, as Principal Race Advisor to LSPU, Anselm King, said, "crucial to confront the issue in an open forum as we have tended to avoid dealing with it up till now."

The conference began with a look at the findings in the book *Black Africa and Racism* by Drs Hard and Roslind Chiruta, which shows how much scientific research in the area

has been questionable. Media theories of epidemics and pande-



## AIDS, racism and homophobia

tics correspond not to available and correlatable facts, but to preconceived ideas that blacks by their nature are dirty, diseased and sexually unrestrained. For example, Robert C. Gallo's claim to have discovered the "ancestral origins" of the HTLV-III virus in the African green monkey, was eagerly taken up in the press (despite being, to date, unproven) because of its "fit" with pre-existing myths of Africa as the "dark continent."

The rationalisation of the fear of germs through xenophobia dictates discriminatory politics in practice. Restrictive health criteria were first introduced into British immigration law in 1905, in the midst of a major medico-moral panic about the "degeneration" of the eugenic stock of the English, and its implications for the empire. In 1966 a minor outbreak of smallpox among Pakistanis in Bradford caused a micro-panic on the part of the British Medical Association, who demanded the medical surveillance of black immigrants. And these racist precepts, conducted in the name of "national health," link to various "final solutions" for AIDS advocated by the rabid right—such as tattooing, quarantine and, yes, extermination.

At the conference these links were spelt out by Dr Frances Welsing of the Atlanta Centre

for Disease Controls who has developed the "Cress-theory" of white supremacy. The theory holds that, because they are a minority in the global genepool, whites have an "inferiority-complex" which is periodically manifested in the genocide of black races.

These conspiracy theories have merely reversed the roles of victim and victimiser in the demonology of AIDS. This is dangerously dis-enabling: If AIDS is the result of a "plot," then what can you or I possibly do about it?

The notion of racial genocide has a strong appeal because it appears to explain the fact that so many black lives globally are being lost to the disease. In some American cities where the incidence of AIDS among white gay men has declined, death through the disease among blacks and Hispanics is higher than any other social group. This may be due to intravenous drug abuse or bisexuality, or to the fact that racism denies minorities equal access to affordable health counselling.

Dr Welsing did not help to clarify such issues; rather, by suggesting—without evidence—that condoms sold in black neighbourhoods are deliberately punctured, her contribution only exacerbated fear.

The need to counteract racism is vital. But it cannot be

accomplished by unsubstantiated speculation. This provides an outlet for justified anger, but it obscures the more complex issue of how black people have had to cope with myths about black sexuality (which many macho black men cling to) and their own contradictions. Hypocrisy is not the exclusive property of the white establishment either, as anti-gay statements from some fundamentalist black churches indicate.

Dr Welsing's position contrasted with the sensitive and intelligent position taken by Reverend Carl Bean of the Los Angeles based Minority AIDS Project. He quietly asserted that it is not necessary to know the "cause" of suffering to treat people with AIDS with care, compassion and dignity.

Pioneering safe-sex counselling services to overcome fear and ignorance, his positive assertions showed the confidence of the Afro-American civil rights tradition which is sadly lacking in the UK. Here, there is just a demoralised dependency on local authority funding of initiatives such as the Black Community AIDS Team. And the assault on civil rights in clause 28 of the new local government bill, could make even such efforts illegal for "promoting" homosexuality. This at a time when sensible sex education is essential in the fight against AIDS. **Kobena Mercer**

### PUBLICATIONS

Race and Class, volume XXIX, number 3. With a special feature on the Australian bicentenary. £2.50. From the Institute of Race Relations, London WC1.

New Community. Journal for the Commission for Racial Equality. A special double issue marking the tenth anniversary of the CRE. £7.50. From the CRE, London SW1.

### EVENTS

A conference on black film and British cinema at the ICA, London SW1. Saturday, 6 February.

The next issue of RACE AND SOCIETY will appear on 5 February 1988. RACE AND SOCIETY is edited and produced by NEW SOCIETY and sponsored by the Commission for Racial Equality.



### BOOKS

# The Gipper unmasked

REAGAN'S AMERICA: INNOCENTS AT HOME

Garry Wills

Heinemann £14.95

SIMON HOGGART

It's a curious fact that when American presidents fail, their last supporters are often found in Britain. Anyone who worked in Washington during the seventies, including *The Times's* correspondents, knew that Richard Nixon had the mentality of a street gang leader. Yet Sir William Rees Mogg and Bernard Levin continued to offer effusive support to the point where his own side drove him from office. The job of Republicans' useful fool seems to have passed to the *Independent's* leader writer, though their US staff have been daily charting the collapse of "Reaganism."

I don't know why the British are loyal beyond reasonable limits, but it may have something to do with American mood swings. US public opinion changes at an alarming rate. When I arrived here, nearly three years ago, Reagan was discussed as the finest postwar president, who'd restored America's pride in itself and uniquely captured the national mood. Liberals were skeetering to the right, and the 1988 election winner was assumed to be whoever could

depict himself as Reagan's heir.

The group most in thrall was Washington's chattering classes—those who were most aware of his sloppiness, laziness and bizarre fantasy life. Somehow this increased his mystique. If he could be like that and still win two landslides, his bond with the American people must be magical indeed. This belief survived the fact that, according to polls, Reagan was by no means as popular as even his opponents seemed to think.

For six years criticism of the president, whether in the media or from political opponents, was muted and even respectful. Disdain for Reagan revealed that the speaker was out of touch with the soul of the American people.

All that changed utterly in November 1986, when, within a few hours the Senate fell to the Democrats (in spite of an unprecedented national campaign by Reagan) and it was revealed he'd been selling rockets to Iran. From then on it was open season. Reagan was baffled and angered by the switch; he talked about the "bile" he felt for

'Win one for the Gipper'—Reagan as the football star, George Gipp, in the 1940 film, 'Knute Rockne—All American'

the press, which was behaving like "sharks at a feeding frenzy."

America is making up for lost time. Newspapers chronicle his "disengagement" (the euphemism for idleness). Tip O'Neill, the retired speaker of the House called him "the worst president I ever knew"—unsayable, if not unthinkable, two years ago. The other day I heard a Republican candidate, Al Haig, say "we don't want a dullard in the White House, we've had enough of that," leaving no doubt whom he meant.

For those of us who never had much time for this foolish, self-deluding man (it's not true that he's senile; he's always been much the same), the worm turning has been as startling as the respectful silence from 1981 to 1986. I suspect the *volte face* is one reason for the loyalty of the president's British admirers: we pride ourselves on avoiding intellectual backflips. But as any tortoise will tell you, such immobility can leave you stuck on your back with your legs in the air.

One result of the new anti-Reagan *glasnost* is a series of books which attempt to explain the phenomenon and account for the national six-year trance. Garry Wills's is the best I've read. Wills argues (to paraphrase heavily) that Reagan has always peddled to Americans their favourite myths about themselves. It's a task which Hollywood has also done superbly well. Reagan isn't a liar nor (probably) a crook, but a fantasist who believes what he wants to believe and then recycles it as truth. His special allure comes from the way that, for him, the dreams are real.

This is not new, but what Wills has done is research the argument through Reagan's life. For example, Reagan has often described what it was like "coming home" after the war and the joy of reunion with family. It's an experience shared by millions, depicted in a thousand movies. Except that Reagan never actually left home. He made films for the US air force in Los Angeles. His tear-stained Return Home happened 365 days a year.

In 1983 Reagan twice said he'd filmed Nazi death camps just after the war. In fact, he'd never been to Germany. Wills thinks he isn't lying, but watching a film that's being projected in his head. In Reagan's world fact and fiction aren't just confused, they're one and the same. Scenes from movies, like the heroic black steward at Pearl Harbour who ended racism in the armed forces, are not only more real than reality; they reinforce reality by making specific moral points. Actual facts and events are admitted only when they are as acceptable as fiction and can strengthen the myth.

In 1986 the United States swapped a Soviet spy for the American reporter, Nick Daniloff. This hardly suited the image of a nation which refused to bend to communist blackmail, so Reagan decided it hadn't happened. Listeners to his weekly radio address were astonished to hear him announce there had been no exchange: American strength had forced the Soviets to release Daniloff.